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EROSION CLOSES A NORTHPORT ROAD: Fighting Mother Nature

Closure on Woodbine Ave. hurts businesses; mayor seeks aid

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The two trees leaning toward each other would regularly catch William Friedman's eye. They were just a stone's throw from his Woodbine Avenue home, on a bluff overlooking Northport Harbor.



They weren't always like that. Rather, village officials say, years of erosion slowly uprooted the trees until they began shifting.

Then, one Tuesday last month following a particularly rough winter storm, Friedman returned home from work to an eye-catching sight of a different sort.

"I look up there, and the trees are gone," said Friedman, a longtime Northport resident. "I said, 'I can't believe it. It's gone.'"

Despite his initial surprise, Friedman said he could have predicted that the soil would give out, sending the trees sliding down the hill.

"I've been watching that hill for 25 years or more and telling the village to do something," he said. "Now, I don't have to tell them to do something."

After years of considering the erosion problem on Woodbine Avenue, Northport Village officials are rushing to resolve what many are calling an emergency situation.

"It's been serious for a long time," said Harry Mayer, who also lives on Woodbine, just next to the most severely eroded section of the hill. "This is the worst it's ever been here."

Earlier this month, the village shut part of narrow Woodbine Avenue, which runs north and south, connecting Route 25A with Main Street, the village's commercial hub. Then, just last week, village Mayor Peter Panarites took the drastic measure of shutting a large section of the road altogether, significantly impacting merchants.

But Panarites said he could not risk any more damage to roadside bluff, which stretches about

120 feet and drops about 40 feet to the shoreline.

Where once stood a sloping hill covered with trees, vegetation and a wooden platform overlooking the harbor, with a stairway leading up to the road, now is a mostly vertical drop. Most of the trees are uprooted. The stairs and balcony have collapsed into a pile of lumber.

Engineers said the cause of the erosion is a combination of the pounding tide of Northport Harbor and several groundwater streams inside the hill. This year's harsh winter has sped up the erosion, because as the groundwater freezes and then thaws, the soil inside the hill loosens.

Residents said they have noticed the shoreline erode several inches this winter, leaving little sand on the beach.

More than just aesthetics, village officials and residents are concerned with the potential dangers. The hollowing out of the hill could cause sewer pipes to rupture, potentially sending untreated sewerage into Northport Harbor.

Or, even worse, village engineer Gary Rozmus said, another collapse could stretch all the way up to, and beneath, Woodbine Avenue. "If that gives way, you could have a collapse of the roadway," he said.

In the past, the village has implemented short-term solutions, including constructing a 20-foot underground steel plate at the foot of the hill to protect Woodbine. That plate is almost completely exposed now.

Last year, Panarites began pursuing a long-term solution with the office of U.S. Rep. Steve Israel (D-Dix Hills), who helped him secure a \$450,000 federal grant for a U.S. Army Corps of Engineers project, originally set to begin in 2005.

Last month, Panarites gathered with Army Corps representatives and elected officials for emergency meetings, with hopes of getting a project started as soon as possible.

"This is a time bomb - economically, environmentally," Panarites said, while tromping through the exposed clay at the bottom of the hill. "What we're doing is fighting Mother Nature. And Mother Nature doesn't wait for bureaucracy."

The project, estimated to cost nearly \$1 million, would require the village to take over the eroded property so the Army Corps and the state Department of Environmental Conservation could regrade the eroded hill, plant vegetation and build a bulkhead to prevent further erosion.

"This is an emergency," said state Sen. Carl Marcellino (R-Syosset), who visited the site and is working to get state funding for the project. "This past winter has been particularly harsh, and the erosion underneath the roadway is rather dramatic."

Tom Pfeifer, chief of the coastal section and planning division of the New York District Army Corps of Engineers, said the agency is working on a project design, but added, "We don't have any time frame on it."

The property is divided into two lots, one of which is owned by the county and likely will be transferred to the village. The other is owned by a Florida couple, whom the town hopes will

sell the land, or risk having it condemned by the village.

In the meantime, village attorney Michael White said Northport is prepared to make emergency repairs if the situation worsens, including protecting sewer pipes and trying to stabilize the hill temporarily.

Still, residents like Mayer hope a long-term solution is in sight. "It can be a disaster if nothing is done about it," he said. "It affects everybody."

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